

# The Pandemic and its Impact on the South Korea-Japan Identity Clash

Scott A. Snyder

The global pandemic caused by the onset of the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 has tested governance at both the national and international levels by challenging the capacity of nations to provide effective public health solutions to protect their citizenry. The pandemic has deepened preexisting international rivalries while also creating diplomatic opportunities to promote international cooperation and public diplomacy. Rather than serving as a turning point for a new era in international relations, the pandemic and the global response appear primarily to have accelerated preexisting trends.<sup>1</sup> In Northeast Asia, the pandemic has accelerated deepening rivalry between the United States and China, reinforced political paralysis between Japan and South Korea, primarily by providing a pretext for privileging domestic concerns and constituencies at the expense of international relations, and has generated heightened new foreign policy challenges resulting from deepening identity-based major power rivalries.

This chapter reviews the deepening of identity-based challenges facing Japan-South Korea relations prior to 2020, examines the conditions generated by leadership responses in both countries to the pandemic, identifies missed opportunities for pandemic-related cooperation between the two countries, and addresses challenges and opportunities facing the Japan-South Korea relationship in the context of anticipated recovery from the pandemic as well as the shifting geopolitical environment as tensions mount between China and the United States.

## Trajectory of Japan-South Korea Relations Pre-COVID

Prior to the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, the Japan-South Korea relationship was in a downward spiral following the deterioration under Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo and South Korean president Moon Jae-in. Identity issues underpinned the Moon administration's initial criticism of and eventual decision in 2018 to walk away from the 2015 Japan-South Korea "comfort women" agreement. Conflict over identity issues further informed a series of South Korean Supreme Court rulings from October 2018 to January 2021 on forced labor and "comfort women" that were at odds with prior Japanese court judgments and longstanding Japanese government interpretations of the 1965 Claims Agreement that accompanied diplomatic normalization between Japan and South Korea. Tensions ratcheted up with a December 2018 confrontation between Japanese and South Korean defense forces, in which the two made competing claims regarding the circumstances surrounding a South Korean destroyer that allegedly locked its fire control radar on a Japanese intelligence plane. Finally, Japanese export restrictions on chemicals used in South Korean semiconductor production led to a broader trade spat and the South Korean threat to retaliate by withdrawing from a Japan-South Korea military intelligence-sharing agreement. These incidents soured public attitudes in both countries toward the other and eroded cooperative relationships between the defense and business communities, two constituencies that had provided ballast for the relationship during prior periods of tension.

The entanglement of the Japan-South Korea relationship in South Korea's increasingly polarized domestic politics certainly contributed to the downturn in relations under the Moon administration. As part of its campaign to eradicate "past accumulated evils," the Moon administration detained Yang Sung-tae, former Supreme Court chief justice during the

Park Geun-hye administration, on accusations of personnel mismanagement and improper consultation with the executive branch on a variety of issues including Supreme Court cases involving charges of forced labor against Japanese firms. The inclusion of Yang's handling of forced labor cases in the litany of alleged wrongdoings and excessive executive influence on the judiciary entangled South Korea's relationship with Japan in Moon's agenda for judicial reform. At the same time, the Moon administration sought to implement a far-reaching revamp of prosecutorial functions as part of an effort to strengthen judicial independence from the executive branch, while arguing that it was constrained in its ability to intervene in the implementation of Supreme Court judgments in favor of individual Korean victims or court orders to hold Japanese companies accountable through the seizure of their assets held in South Korea.

The Moon administration's decision to criticize and eventually unravel the 2015 "comfort women" agreement further contributed to deterioration and stalemate in the Japan-South Korea relationship.<sup>2</sup> Upon taking office, the administration ordered the foreign ministry to conduct an internal review of the negotiations around the agreement in response to public criticism from "comfort women" that the government had consulted with them insufficiently prior to its signing. The review did not result in South Korea's retraction of the agreement, although Moon strongly criticized it as "defective" and urged Japan to "accept the truth and apologize with a sincere heart" upon the review's completion in January 2018. However, following the announcement of the results of the forced labor case in October, the Moon administration decided in November 2018 to announce the disbanding of the Japan-funded Reconciliation and Healing Foundation on grounds that the foundation had lost its purpose.<sup>3</sup> Abe expressed his deep disappointment, stating that "relations between states don't work when international agreements aren't kept."<sup>4</sup>

The December 20, 2018 "fire-lock incident," involving an encounter in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone off Ishikawa prefecture between a South Korean destroyer engaged in a humanitarian operation and a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces P-1 patrol aircraft, caused further tension in the relationship.<sup>5</sup> Conflicting narratives regarding the incident between the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the South Korean Ministry of National Defense eventually led to public release of video footage by both nations designed to support their respective points of view. Japan's Ministry of Defense argued that the South Korean patrol irradiated the P-1 aircraft with its fire-control radar, while the South Korean Ministry of National Defense released its own video of the incident and argued that it did not direct its radar at the Japanese patrol plane. The nature of the incident and the competing claims generated internal political pressures on both defense ministries to defend their positions and place the blame on the other side.

The deterioration of the Japan-South Korea relationship and ongoing conflict over historical issues led the Japanese government to impose restrictions on the export of three chemicals critical to the manufacture of South Korean semiconductors and the removal of South Korea from Japan's White List of closest trading partners.<sup>6</sup> These measures generated strong public backlash in South Korea, including boycotts against Japanese firms such as Uniqlo, and a dramatic downturn in tourism between the two countries. South Korea pursued arguments against Japan's export restrictions at the World Trade Organization and threatened to end its participation in a bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Japan and South Korea that entered into force in 2016.

The Japan-South Korea relationship remained in the deep freeze throughout 2019 and into 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic. In a 2019 survey of opinion in each country by Genron NPO, a Japanese think tank, and the East Asia Institute, its Korean counterpart, more than 49% of South Korean respondents said they had either a “bad” or “relatively bad” impression of Japan. In the 2020 poll, 71 percent of South Koreans had either a “bad” or “relatively bad” impression of Japan, an increase of 21.5 percentage points from the 2019 survey. The percentage of those with either a “good” or “relatively good” impression of Japan plummeted from 31.7 percent in 2019 to just 12.3 percent in 2020. In 2020, a whopping 88.4 percent of South Korean respondents characterized Japan-South Korean relations as either “relatively bad” or “extremely bad,” an increase from 66.1 percent in the 2019 survey. Views of South Korea among the Japanese public are slightly better. Under half (46.3 percent) of Japanese respondents expressed either a “bad” or “relatively bad” impression of South Korea in 2020, a 3.6 percentage point improvement over 2019. Still, in 2020 more than half of respondents (54.7 percent) described Japan-South Korea relations as either “relatively bad” or “extremely bad,” an improvement from 63.5 percent in the previous poll.<sup>7</sup>

The South Korean government decided at the end of 2019 to “suspend its withdrawal” from GSOMIA while Japan’s removal of South Korea from its White List and its imposition of export controls of three critical chemicals had not in practice caused significant damage or even a halt in supply. But putting a floor on the deterioration of relations between the two sides has resulted in stalemate and stagnancy, a trend reinforced by the global prioritization of domestic needs over global goals that has accompanied the pandemic. The advent of COVID-19 placed a priority on domestic affairs at the expense of international relations globally, both because the immediate public health crisis necessitated domestic management of the spread of the disease and because opportunities for diplomats to meet face-to-face in order to conduct international diplomacy were drastically curtailed.

## South Korea’s Handling of COVID-19

The spread of a new coronavirus in Wuhan and other parts of China fixed the attention of international observers on a crisis that initially seemed distant, but soon challenged both national and global governance as nations grappled to contain, mitigate, and isolate the spread of the virus. The World Health Organization sounded the alarm and disseminated information about the virus, but responsibility for protecting citizens fell to national public health bureaucracies in coordination with local health infrastructures. After an initial struggle to contain the virus following its spread from China, South Korea’s successful public health response came to be hailed as an international model for limiting its spread and became a diplomatic opportunity for the Moon administration to burnish South Korea’s image as a leader in public health.

South Korea recorded its first COVID-19 cases on January 20, 2020.<sup>8</sup> Within days, it became the first epicenter for spread of the virus outside of China.<sup>9</sup> The Korean Center for Disease Control (KCDC) nimbly applied lessons learned from the spread of Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the mid-2000s and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015 to contain the first wave of the virus within weeks, providing a textbook example of effective contagious disease response.

The Moon administration initially took heat from the Korean Medical Association for not applying a strict quarantine to travelers from China, in contrast to the U.S. early China travel ban. Such bans, however, proved far less consequential than the capacity of authorities to mount an effective public health campaign involving testing, tracing, and patient treatment. Korean authorities were criticized for exporting masks to China in the early stages of the crisis without sufficient regard for the need to produce adequate personal protection equipment (PPE) supplies in the event that the outbreak spread to South Korea. But South Korea quickly overcame PPE production shortfalls and became a top exporter of PPE by April 2020, by which time the epicenter for spread of the virus had shifted to Europe. As South Korea brought the virus under control through effective KCDC management, the Moon administration touted South Korean successes as a model for other countries and made provision of PPE a component of its public diplomacy at international forums.

The first step in South Korea's pandemic response was its mobilization of effective public-private cooperation to produce a test for COVID-19 detection based on information about the genetic structure of the virus provided by China.<sup>10</sup> This public-private coordination enabled South Korea to ramp up an effective testing regime. Within days, companies were producing tests and labs were analyzing the results to diagnose COVID-19 cases. South Korea also introduced drive-through testing, a technique quickly adopted around the world that made testing widely available and reduced contamination risks that otherwise would have accompanied patients into doctors' offices and hospital waiting rooms.<sup>11</sup>

The second element of South Korea's response learned from prior experience with SARS and MERS involving the mobilization of cell phone technology to conduct contact tracing.<sup>12</sup> By marrying cell phone tracking with information about the movements of those who had contracted COVID-19, the KCDC effectively traced the spread of the disease and provided text message warnings to those people who had come into contact with identified COVID-19 carriers and to those people visiting places also visited by COVID-positive patients. This technology-driven approach has inspired debate about balancing public health concerns and individual privacy, both through the tracing of the proximity of individuals to locations where spread occurred and through the use of information about individual whereabouts without user consent.

The third element of South Korea's successful initial COVID-19 response involved treatment practices that reduced the burden on hospital caseloads and provision of quarantine facilities where doctors and nurses could monitor patients while reducing the risk of further spread.<sup>13</sup> South Korea's quarantine protocols and offers of testing for undocumented migrants without threat of deportation also included quarantine requirements and provision of room and board for foreigners to prevent travelers from introducing the disease from outside South Korea.<sup>14</sup>

South Korea's response to COVID-19 benefited from high public trust in specialized expertise within South Korean government institutions earned on the basis of performance in handling of MERS. KCDC Director Jeung Eun-kyung and her colleagues led South Korea's response with twice daily briefings that emphasized the importance of a public health response to the virus and provided the South Korean public with clear guidelines on how to respond. South Korea also benefited from the fact that mask-wearing was already a part of the culture, as a means to prevent spread of illnesses, to show courtesy to the health of

others, and due to worsening air quality.<sup>15</sup> The benefits and utility of mask-wearing were already widely accepted in South Korea, and further strengthened by guidance from the KCDC emphasizing the importance of PPE, social distancing, and hand washing.

Thanks to its mobilization of public-private cooperation, its technology-driven approach, its effective treatment practices, its culture of mask-wearing, and the relatively high compliance of the South Korean public with government instructions, South Korea avoided a China-style lockdown in its initial response to COVID-19. Day-to-day activities in many areas were subdued, but not suppressed, by state guidelines. Many restaurants remained open, though economic activity was hindered by South Korean personal choices to avoid dining choices that might heighten the risk of community spread. South Korea quickly dropped from the country with the second largest number of detected cases at the beginning of March 2020 to ranking seventy-fifth in number of cases by the end of August.<sup>16</sup> It experienced a relatively low COVID-19 death toll in 2020, and maintained a low mortality rate per capita during this time period.<sup>17</sup> A second wave challenged South Korea's initial success and led to a stricter round of social distancing guidelines through the winter of 2020-21, but by and large the KCDC successfully kept the daily rate of infections below one thousand.

Despite this success, the Moon administration found itself facing a new round of public criticisms for failing to contract with leading pharmaceutical companies to ensure early delivery of the vaccine to South Korea. While Americans began receiving Pfizer and Moderna vaccines in December of 2020, the AstraZeneca vaccine did not come to South Korea until February 27, 2021. The relatively slow procurement of vaccine generated domestic criticism, but this policy failure did not have a major impact on international perceptions of South Korea's successful and proactive public health response to COVID-19, which became a talking point for the Moon administration at international meetings. South Korea's supply of COVID-19 test kits and PPE has become an opportunity for it to enhance its positive image and engender international good will. Moon even proposed the establishment of a regional public health organization in Northeast Asia in his October 2020 UN General Assembly speech. But preexisting regional rivalries, including the rising U.S.-China rivalry and stalemate in the Japan-South Korea relationship, have constrained the ability to follow up on this proposal. Though the proposal provided an opportunity for diplomatic follow-up with Japan, it is unclear whether the Blue House reached out to Japan to request its support and participation in the proposed regional healthcare body. Instead, the single major initiative the Moon administration to reach out to Japan has involved using the summer 2021 Olympics as a catalyst for diplomacy toward North Korea.

## Japan's Handling of COVID-19

The Japanese government was on the front lines of the COVID-19 response, both as a result of the early identification of Japan's first diagnosed case on January 15, 2020,<sup>18</sup> and as a result of the early outbreak of cases on a cruise ship, the Diamond Princess, that docked in Japan.<sup>19</sup> In its initial stages, the Japanese government's response focused on the application of quarantines and travel bans to prevent the virus from entering Japan, while relying on a "cluster-based approach" to identify and address sources of spread.<sup>20</sup> The government declared a national emergency from April 7-May 25, 2020 and subsequently reissued a

state of emergency in Tokyo from January 7 through March 2021.<sup>21</sup> These emergencies coincided with two waves of virus spread that resulted in peaks in hospitalizations and deaths in Japan. Japan's government was also attentive to the negative impact of the virus on the economy, passing two major government relief packages for companies and individuals impacted by COVID-19 in April and May 2020.<sup>22</sup>

Following initial reports of COVID-19 spread, Japan quickly strengthened border controls and banned flights from areas affected by the pandemic. Border restrictions on individuals who had traveled from China's Hubei Province were implemented on February 1 and from China's Zhejiang Province on February 13, followed by restrictions on flights from South Korea on February 27, and from most European countries on March 21. Authorities required polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and quarantines for travelers from those areas. With the rapid global spread of the virus, Japan found itself with no choice but to postpone the Tokyo Olympics on March 26, 2020.

The Japanese government identified its main goals as early detection of and response to COVID-19 clusters, enhancement of availability of intensive care facilities and medical equipment, and modification of public health behaviors among the citizenry by requesting that citizens abstain from public activities, by closing schools temporarily, and by avoiding the "3Cs" (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings).<sup>23</sup> By issuing national emergency orders in response to the pandemic, the central government strengthened its public messaging and played an oversight and mobilization role, but had relatively little central authority to enforce public health mandates. This put political leaders in a difficult position, caught between responsibility for managing the pandemic response and limited authority to take stringent measures such as lockdowns.<sup>24</sup> Japan has, therefore, relied on persuasion rather than coercion to encourage local authorities and the Japanese public to follow central government guidance.

Japan has grappled with major challenges in the course of its response to the pandemic crisis. Similar to many countries, the greatest concerns revolved around securing adequate PPE, ICU capacity, and equipment necessary to properly treat COVID-19, as well as the risk of overtaxing healthcare professionals. In contrast to the strong centralized role of the KCDC, Japan's public health system is relatively decentralized, relying on a network of Public Health Centers (PHC) at the local level to act as the gatekeeper for screening, management, and referral of cases to various hospitals. Through the PHC system, Japanese authorities have sought to identify and isolate primary vectors for transmission of the virus as its primary response, rather than resorting to the lockdowns utilized in many countries. The PHC system has also been charged with triaging COVID-19 patients by level of severity of symptoms to provide effective treatment while avoiding bottlenecks and unnecessary burdens on the public health infrastructure.

A major constraint that emerged in Japan's response to the first wave of the crisis in the spring of 2020 was the relatively limited availability of PCR test kits in Japan. This and restrictions on testing provided a worrisome constraint on Japan's ability to identify and contain cluster infections, which was central to Japan's response strategy. The PHCs were "bottlenecks for testing" and due to inadequate technological infrastructure could be inefficient in sharing critical patient information, placing additional strain on the hospital system already dealing with a flood of patients.<sup>25</sup> Japanese authorities did not seriously

consider adoption of South Korea's innovative drive-through testing. Authorities also struggled with the introduction of telemedicine, the adoption of which faced a number of cultural and technical obstacles.<sup>26</sup>

The Japanese government proactively worked to curtail the economic impact of COVID-19 by issuing two major economic packages. The first, a March 2020 1 trillion yen emergency package, focused on supporting businesses impacted by COVID-19.<sup>27</sup> The following month, the government authorized a ¥100,000 yen handout to all citizens regardless of income.<sup>28</sup> A second 1 trillion yen relief package was authorized in May 2020, followed by a "Go to Travel" campaign that promoted domestic travel within Japan as a means to stimulate spending and support sectors most dramatically impacted by the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>

Despite concerns that Japan's public health system was under stress, Japan emerged from the first wave of COVID-19 in relatively good shape. Abe touted Japan's cluster-based approach to handling of the crisis as worthy of emulation, declaring on the occasion of the lifting of the state of emergency in May 2020 that "with this unique Japanese approach, we were able to control this [infection] trend in just 1.5 months; I think this has shown the power of the Japanese model."<sup>30</sup> There were reports that Japan was early to join an agreement with leading pharmaceutical companies to secure 120 million doses of vaccine, the manufacture of which would take place in Japan to ensure efficient distribution. However, those reports proved to be exaggerated in practice as Pfizer vaccine availability was limited and other vaccines were slow to win approval for use in Japan.<sup>31</sup> Abe suggested the establishment of an international "vaccine patent pool" to aid in securing vaccine distribution to developing nations and as a means of countering Chinese vaccine diplomacy.<sup>32</sup>

The Japanese model faced a more severe test in early 2021, with a third wave of COVID-19 cases requiring the government to announce another state of emergency. This time, Japan was much better prepared on the testing front, but faced more significant challenges in terms of volume of patients and stress on the broader hospital system. But the Japanese response to the crisis was relatively effective in containing the virus. By February 2021, the number of COVID-19 patients was steadily decreasing from its January peak, according to statistics provided by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare.<sup>33</sup>

## Missed Opportunities for Pandemic Diplomacy

The Japanese and South Korean responses to the pandemic have largely unfolded in parallel, with the pandemic primarily reinforcing preoccupations with domestic considerations over foreign policy concerns. The main obstacles to the improvement of the Japan-South Korea relationship have remained in place during the pandemic as a result of the two leaders' preoccupation with domestic concerns. These circumstances have left the Japan-South Korea relationship in a state of inertia following the sustained deterioration that began in early 2018. While Japan-South Korea relations have not worsened, the pandemic has resulted in a number of missed opportunities for Japan and South Korea to utilize cooperation on COVID-19 response as a catalyst for improving their relationship.



For instance, as one of the first nations to find itself on the other side of the curve, South Korea had the opportunity to reach out to Japan when it was still experiencing its first wave of infections. A South Korean offer to provide assistance with PPE and testing kits during late April and early May 2020 would have made a positive impression on the Japanese public, even if the Abe administration were to refuse the offer. At that point, Japan faced a critical shortage of test kits, and stocks of PPE were also in short supply as Japanese hospitals began to face the first wave of patients. This was a potentially golden moment for pandemic diplomacy, as South Korea began to ramp up an international messaging campaign touting its initial success in managing the pandemic in April. But South Korea did not offer, and Japan did not request, pandemic-related assistance at this time, in part due to the preexisting negative atmosphere surrounding the bilateral relationship and in part due to prior domestic criticisms of South Korea for providing PPE stocks to China, depleting the stockpile for use in the event of a Korean crisis. *Asahi Shimbun* noted that both Abe and Moon had proposed parallel proposals for international cooperation in response to the pandemic, concluding that “the neighbors should now forget about face-saving and instead share information and needed supplies to overcome the crisis together.”<sup>34</sup> The paper further observed that “the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of the international sharing of knowledge and information in the areas of health care and epidemic prevention” as part of an in-depth review of problems in the Japan-South Korea relationship and how they might be addressed.<sup>35</sup> But no action was taken in response to such recommendations in the summer of 2020.

A second missed opportunity came in the fall of 2020, when Moon recommended as part of his speech to the UN General Assembly the establishment of a regional organization dedicated to responding to the pandemic. But the Moon administration failed to pursue specific follow-ups and did not utilize the proposal as a vehicle for improving relations with Japan, despite the clear necessity of Japan’s support for the proposal’s success. Instead, by pursuing parallel proposals for multilateral cooperation at different venues, the pandemic response appears to have become a new venue for Japan-South Korea political competition—despite support among international observers for both to utilize the pandemic to join forces and provide regional leadership.<sup>36</sup>

Despite its failure to forge cooperation with Japan around pandemic responses, the Moon administration has attempted to reset its relationship with Japan following Joseph R. Biden’s electoral victory. Moon’s initiatives have aligned closely with its broader diplomatic priority of promoting engagement with North Korea by proposing that Japan might utilize its hosting of the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 2021 as the foundation for a new diplomatic initiative toward North Korea. South Korea’s spy chief Park Chi-won proposed such an initiative during a visit to Japan in November 2020, suggesting the possibility of a multilateral summit involving North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Suga, Biden, and Moon. But it remains to be seen whether any substantive diplomatic efforts will emerge around the idea of using the Olympics for a second time to jumpstart summit-level diplomatic outreach to North Korea.

## Sino-U.S. Competition and its Influence on the Japan-South Korea Identity Conflict

The U.S. framing of deepening conflict between the United States and China could further add indirectly to tensions in Japan-South Korea relations, especially as related to the United States. Japan is well on the road to exploring balancing options against China's expanding maritime influence through its authorship of the concept of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" region that has become the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations' default strategic concept framing the approach to the region. South Korea, on the other hand, has sought to accommodate China while simultaneously cooperating with the United States, reflecting the country's dependency on economic relations with China as a source of economic growth while relying on the alliance with the United States to guarantee South Korea's security.

The pandemic served as an accelerant for rising Sino-U.S. rivalry, while also generating new management challenges for South Korea as a third party that pursued choice avoidance in the face of rising demands from both Washington and Beijing. China and South Korea were two countries that successfully contained the initial wave of COVID-19 spread by using very different models, with China achieving success through lockdown while South Korea utilized vigilance, technology, and effective public messaging to achieve its success. But South Korea resisted the temptation to be placed in competition with China in the spring of 2020 as a democratic alternative to China's lockdown. South Korea also declined to take up the values banner in competition with China's initial pandemic diplomacy efforts to provide PPE and test kits to European countries struggling with spread of the virus, to promote a democratic alternative to China's diplomatic efforts.<sup>37</sup>

The Biden administration's emphasis on like-mindedness among allies as the framing for its Indo-Pacific diplomacy, again raises expectations and pressure designed to hem in South Korea to make rather than avoid strategic choices between the United States and China. On the one hand, "peer pressure" may induce greater alignment by South Korea with the United States and Japan, especially to the extent that "fear of missing out" (FOMO) motivates South Korea to consider whether inclusion in like-minded country groups such as the Quad or the D-10 would give South Korea enhanced influence to push for its own preferred outcomes, especially as related to compartmentalizing some forms of cooperation with China even in the context of growing competition.

But there is also the possibility that South Korea may react negatively to U.S. pressure on South Korea to align with a broader group on the basis of common values without due consideration of South Korean strategic interests in maintaining some forms of cooperation with China, especially if South Koreans perceive that pressure as being generated by enhanced Japanese influence on U.S. policies, or perceive a pro-Japan tilt at the expense of South Korea, in the Biden administration's approaches to the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Secretary of State Tony Blinken's early and stark emphasis on the need for "diplomacy to check the rise of authoritarianism ... [and] to shore up democracy" has drawn a line that is likely to deepen identity-based competition between the United States and China.<sup>38</sup> Further, the U.S. strategy involves coalition building among like-minded countries in favor

of observing a rule-based international system as distinguished from authoritarian systems. This framing casts authoritarian systems as dissatisfied with rules of the road, likely to resort to coercion to achieve national goals, and as challengers to the liberal international order. It raises the costs of hedging for South Korea and presents particular difficulties and contradictions for the Moon administration, which claims domestic legitimacy based on associations with South Korea's democratization while hesitating to embrace international cohesion with fellow democracies.

The Biden administration's framing of Blinken's first trip to Asia colors in a strategy around the strategic framing of a competition with China that involves conflict between democratic and authoritarian identities. The holding of the first Quad summit sent a message that like-minded countries are prepared to work together to provide public goods such as vaccines to countries in need as a means of countering China's own vaccine diplomacy. The Quad further delineated supply chain security and cooperation on climate change issues as future priorities.

Then the Biden administration held two-plus-two meetings with Japanese and Korean allies as the first cabinet-level engagement in the region immediately prior to the first high-level U.S.-China meeting. These meetings further reinforced the objective of restoration of alliances and coalition-strengthening among allies as a framing that would allow the United States to engage China "from a position of strength" as like-minded countries.

The holding of these meetings as the first overseas in-person, cabinet-level engagement of the Biden administration showed that the U.S. desires to restore U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea alliance cooperation on the basis of partnership and consultation designed to reaffirm common values and common objectives, that alliance coordination is essential to its coalition-building strategy in competition to counter China's use of coercive measures to overstep or bend international norms to its advantage, and that the competition with China would be organized around common values and shared identities among democratic partners.

The Biden administration's choreography of alliance-based coordination of back-to-back two-plus-two meetings successfully secured formal endorsement, in both Tokyo and Seoul, of efforts to restore trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea coordination. But differences in the respective communiqués foreshadowed gaps over respective approaches to China and North Korea that threatened to hamstring the strategy. These differences illustrated the difficulties the Moon administration faced in adjusting to a broadened sphere of competition between the United States and China and the Biden administration's use of alliance solidarity as a basis for pursuing that competition.

The U.S.-Japan joint press statement directly called out China's behavior and stated that the ministers "committed to coercion and destabilizing behavior toward others in the region, which undermines the rules-based international system," while calling for the "complete denuclearization of North Korea" while the U.S.-ROK joint statement omitted direct mention of China and stated that "North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues are a priority for the alliance."<sup>40</sup> Chinese analysts noted the omission of China from the joint statement and credited it to "Seoul's rationality in dealing with Washington."<sup>41</sup>

It is likely that the People's Republic of China will redouble its efforts in this context to bring pressure to bear on South Korea to bound its trilateral alignments with Japan and the United States. Beijing already has put down a marker by eliciting assurances from the Moon administration in October of 2017 that it would abide by the three noes: no trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea alliance, no cooperation with regional missile defense, and no additional deployments of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system in South Korean territory. The Moon administration argued that the three noes were an expression of immediate realities; Beijing attempted to portray them as binding and enduring South Korean commitments, generating additional mistrust between Seoul and Beijing.

Either the Biden administration efforts to enhance extended deterrence to address progress in North Korean missile development made during the Trump administration, or broader efforts to extend the scope of South Korean maritime cooperation southward in the context of alignment of the South Korean New Southern and U.S. Indo-Pacific policies, could rekindle China's sensitivities and its economic retaliation campaign toward South Korea. These are developments designed to test the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance as a potential weak link; in the course of doing so, all three countries will need to be mindful of Chinese pressure and will need to devise more effective strategies designed to neutralize the threat of Chinese economic retaliation as a meaningful cost South Korea must bear in the context of pressures deriving from rising Sino-U.S. rivalry.

## Conclusion: Prospects for Post-Pandemic Japan-South Korea Relations

As the global pandemic eases, there will be space for concerned governments to renew their efforts to bring Japan-South Korea relations out of the stasis that has been reinforced by the overwhelming press of pandemic-focused concerns. Though the principal identity-focused conflicts over history and politics that caused the downturn in Japan-South Korea relations in 2018 remain to be tackled, the easing of the pandemic will remove some obstacles that have contributed to the current stalemate. In addition, Biden's leadership of trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea coordination in Northeast Asia has already provided a basis for renewed relations.

The Moon administration has sent high-level envoys including National Intelligence Service Director Park Chi-won to Tokyo for consultations. Both countries have appointed new ambassadors, and Moon has made public overtures calling for improved Japan-South Korea relations. But whether the two administrations can successfully grapple with the sensitive history-related issues or take steps to reverse the deterioration of the relationship is unclear.

Suga has largely continued the domestic and foreign policies set by the Abe administration. In response to South Korean efforts to host a "Plus Three" meeting with Chinese and Japanese leaders in Seoul by the end of 2020, the Suga administration sought reassurances that the Moon administration would not take further actions to enforce existing Supreme Court rulings on forced labor and "comfort women" as a political condition for visiting Seoul, but the two sides were unable to work out an understanding. Subsequently, the

South Korean Supreme Court issued a January 8, 2021, ruling and awarded damages to “comfort women,” justifying Suga’s caution in deflecting Moon’s invitation and creating problems for Moon just as he had changed his tone on relations with Japan. The Japanese government will likely wait for the Moon administration to freeze the enforcement of the Supreme Court verdicts or identify means other than seizing Japanese corporate assets in South Korea as a mechanism for providing compensation to victims. The Japanese government will also continue to watch for signals that the Moon administration does not intend to challenge the legitimacy of the 1965 Normalization Treaty and Claims Agreement.

With a post-pandemic recovery underway and the Biden administration providing a more supportive framing context for improvement of Japan-South Korea relations, there may be greater opportunities to work out understandings that can lead to a recovery of relations. Post-pandemic recovery efforts might provide both sides with an excuse to remove impediments to more active economic and trade relations in an effort to jumpstart both economies. One area of hope might be the negotiation of a post-pandemic economic recovery package built around either bilateral trade or the prospect of bringing South Korea into the Comprehensive and Progressive Trade Promotion Partnership (CPTPP). Both sides should work together to build more robust regional and global response capabilities in the area of public health based on the COVID-19 experience. But it is more likely that the pandemic will continue to interfere with such efforts despite Biden administration efforts to support an improvement of the relationship. Moreover, prospects for a dramatic recovery of the relationship are limited under the current leadership of Moon or Suga, both of whom do not appear predisposed to shape or challenge public sentiments critical of the other side. Both may ultimately be tempted to rely on post-pandemic recovery as a convenient near-term excuse for not doing more, rather than as a transformational opportunity to reframe Japanese and South Korean relations around initiatives for joint cooperation.

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## Endnotes

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